Book Reviews – Buchbesprechungen – Comptes Rendus

Robyn Creswell: *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 272 pp. [series: *translation/transnation*] ISBN 978-0691182186 (hardcover).

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Robyn Creswell opens his excellent study of a strangely neglected topic—Modernism in the Beirut of the 1950's—in dramatic fashion, as though it were a novel: 'It is a scene out of Balzac: a young man from the provinces arrives in the city, hoping to make his fame as a writer.' That 'young man' is the Syrian poet known—and now world-famous—as Adonis (Adūnīs in Arabic), born ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd Esber in 1930 to an Alawite family of farmers in a remote Syrian village. Though this is not a biography of Adonis, or only *en passant*, as it were, he dominates the account, and rightly so. Of the book's six chapters, four are devoted to his work and influence, and they are consistently illuminating. To my knowledge, this is the first scrupulous and perceptive study in English both of Adonis's early poetry and of his impact as a critic, anthologist and literary theorist. Perhaps more importantly, it is the first detailed account of Modernism (*al-ḥadātha* in Arabic) as it took shape, quite tumultuously, in the Beirut of the Fifties. The first two chapters give a vivid picture of that city in the post-war period, complete not only with its literary and political factions and disputes but extending even to its architectural aspects, such as the Phoenicia InterContinental Hotel, designed by Edward Durrell Stone (the lead-architect of New York's Museum of Modern Art), and which opened in 1961; the hotel with its 'white, delicately perforated façade', as the Lebanese journalist Samir Kassir put it, served as a visible symbol of newly Modernist Beirut, helping to enhance the popular image of that city as 'the Paris of the Middle East.' The photograph of the Phoenicia InterContinental that Creswell includes, among several other striking photos in the book, gives a good sense of its imposing presence.

In his Introduction and first two chapters, the author provides a close account of the various rivalries and factions contending for influence in Beirut. Pride of place goes to the innovative journal *Shiʿr* (Poetry), founded in 1957 by the poet Yūsuf al-Khāl on the model of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry Chicago*. The journal ran to forty-four issues from 1957 to 1964 and then from 1967 to 1970. Its striking abstract cover-design, shown here facing an equally austere table of contents page from 1958, announced something new and radical. Poetry, and

poetry alone, would be, and continue to be, its focus. But from the first issue, it represented a radical challenge to other factions, whether traditionalist or Marxist or nationalist. First, it openly strove to break with the rigid conventions of Classical Arabic verse with its intricate prosody and rhyme; and second, it promoted openness to literature world-wide, as opposed to the narrowly defined Arabic tradition. To this end it espoused translations from a wide range of foreign poets—English and American (Whitman, Pound, Eliot), French (Valéry, St.-John Perse, Michaux, Bonnefoy) and Spanish (Lorca, Jiménez, Paz), Italian (Quasimodo) and German (Rilke). But translation—or *naql* in Arabic, a word of varied nuance—served a deeper ambition: along with the break with conventional form, it served as 'a tool to redefine poetry as such', as Creswell puts it. As al-Khāl wrote in the introduction to his *Anthology of American Poetry* in Arabic translation, 'One of the guiding principles of *Shiʿr* is that a creative engagement with the poetic heritage of the world is necessary for the renaissance of Arabic poetry.' Years later, Adonis would complain that

> What we did with *Shiʿr* magazine has not been given, even now, its necessary critical reading. It had been studied, for the most part, antagonistically; or else it has been studied for what we did with form the escape from meter, rhyme, inherited standards, etc. But these are surface readings. Our experience at the magazine, as an experience of poetic creativity, was essentially cultural and civilizational—one that transformed the concept of poetry itself as well as the way it is written.

Such aims provoked a furor. They appeared to be an assault on the integrity, and the luster, of Arabic poetry as it had stood for centuries. The traditional forms and conventions were sacrosanct. Moreover, classical Arabic poets and critics had always been blithely unaware of, and indifferent to, the poetry of other cultures. Poetry in Arabic was seen as supreme, and incomparable, in its consummate perfection. Even worse, to 'transform the concept of poetry itself' led to disturbing innovations, such as the prose poem (*qaṣīdat al-nathr*) which to other more traditional poets, such as the brilliant Iraqi 'pan-Arabist' poet Nāzik al-Malā'ika (1923–2007), herself something of an innovator in the use of 'free verse', seemed to betray a misunderstanding of 'the limits of poetry'. The diverse strands of the controversies that surrounded the little magazine are too intricate to be unravelled in a brief review. Suffice it to say that Creswell untangles them expertly. And his cast of warring characters is quite large. They include not only the literary traditionalists but Marxists, who espoused a poetry that was *engagé* (in the journals *al-Ṭarīq* and *al-Thaqāfa al-waṭanīya*), and nationalists of various stripes, represented by the journal *Adab*. He presents vivid cameos of such figures as Charles Malik, philosopher and diplomat with his espousal of 'Personalism'; or Anṭūn Saʿāda (executed 1949) and his Syrian Social

Nationalist Party (SSNP), to which Adonis belonged (earning him a year in a Syrian jail); the Mahjar 'School' active in Brazil and Argentina; or the controversial, CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) with Ignazio Silone and Stephen Spender as its blundering foreign advisors. Even the great Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyāb makes a somewhat ambiguous appearance under these auspices. One issue that preoccupied the CCF (and others) was whether an openness to foreign literature would have the effect of weakening indigenous traditions. Thus, at the Rome Conference of 1961, Stephen Spender chided Adonis for his 'complete disregard for the ancient heritage of Arabic poetry', a rebuke as astonishing for its ignorance as for its inaccuracy. Creswell remarks with justified asperity: 'It is somewhat breathtaking to read an English poet who knew little to nothing about Arabic literature rebuking Adonis, a *poeta doctus* if there ever was one, for breaking with his own heritage.'

These opening chapters provide context for what is the true heart of the book: a rich and subtle consideration of Adonis's early poetry and criticism under four rubrics. These are, first, in Chapter Three, an analysis of *The Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* of 1961, usually seen as a 'turning-point' in Adonis's work as well as a powerful contribution to the *Shiʿr* program of 'transforming' Arabic poetry. The sequence bears an epigraph from Hölderlin, a resolutely 'foreign' influence, which Creswell in a rare lapse misquotes, though he translates it correctly (it should read: *Warum, o schöne Sonne, genügst du mir…nicht?*). The strange, shadowy, indeed vaporous, figure of Mihyar has inspired much comment. He is 'man' but at the same time, a kind of ghost, even the shadow of a ghost. He seems to exist, if he exists at all, in a kind of occultation, like the dim image on a photograph in the developing tray that never quite comes into focus. Even so, he is a compelling figure—or perhaps I should say, a compelling absence—as one of the opening poems, a 'ritualistic eulogy of the hero', as Creswell terms it, shows:

> He does not know how to speak this speech.
> He does not know the voice of deserts.
> For he is a seer, stony-slumbered.
> But he is freighted with far-off tongues….

In Chapter Four, the author turns to the Arabic prose poem which I mentioned earlier. Adonis, influenced by Suzanne Bernard's *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours* (1959), saw in the form the possibility of a 'new music'. In a manifesto of 1960, written while he was living in Paris on a one-year fellowship, he wrote that 'the prose poem has its music, but it is not a music that submits to the old, canonized rhythms. Instead, it is a music that responds to the experience of dynamism and our new life—a rhythm that renews itself in every instant.' It didn't hurt that the new hybrid form represented a revolt, a 'quadi-

anarchistic gesture of individual rebellion against classical norms.' In this chapter, Creswell invokes the powerful influence on Adonis of the great French poet St.-John Perse (whose complete poetry Adonis translated). Perse was long a discernible influence on Adonis whose verses often tacitly echo his and it is good to find him acknowledged here (though Creswell claims that he is virtually forgotten nowadays. Not true: I read him almost daily!)

This chapter also includes a lengthy discussion of the poet Unsī al-Ḥājj (1937–2014) and his contributions to the Arabic prose poem, as well as his translations of the bizarrely deranged French modernist Antonin Artaud—an hysterical author not calculated to curb the Lebanese poet's unbridled outbursts. 'I seek a virgin scream but do not find even a hesitant murmuration' is one of the poet's calmer ejaculations (I use the word advisedly). Creswell provides a translation of two of his works, including the violent masturbatory fantasy 'The Bubble of Origin, or the Heretical Poem,' from his collection *Lan* of 1960. This strikes me, at least in translation, as the sheerest bilge, lacking any recognizable poetic merit. It is a shame that Creswell finds it necessary to devote so many pages to this studiously unhinged poet while saying almost nothing about the highly original Syrian poet and dramatist Muḥammad al-Maghūṭ though he does acknowledge him in a note. (Readers interested in al-Maghūṭ can read a selection of his poems in the excellent *Joy Is Not My Profession*, translated by John Asfour and Alison Burch)[1].

Creswell's most interesting chapter may be his fifth, 'The Counter Canon', on Adonis's work as an anthologist and, in particular, his monumental, and quite radical, *Dīwān al-shiʿr al-ʿarabī* (Anthology of Arabic Poetry) of 1964, in three volumes (the fifth edition of 2010 is in four volumes). The anthology represented nothing less than a 'revision of the *turāth*', i. e. the canonical tradition. Creswell shows just how drastically Adonis reconfigured the tradition. Thus, he excludes all panegyric (*madḥ*), all vituperative verse (*hijāʾ*), both of which genres constitute the bulk of traditional Arabic verse. It had always been one of Adonis's ambitions to sever poetry from politics, in this case state sponsorship of canonical anthologies. As he put it, alluding to Mallarmé's dictum, ('to purify the dialect of the tribe') this was 'to purify the poetic tradition of politics.' What we are left with in his anthology is what Creswell calls 'the poetics of melancholy', a compendium of poems of lament (*marthīya*). Celebrated poems are slashed, e. g. Abū Tammām's great ode on the conquest of Amorium, reduced to a few lines. There follows an interesting discussion of the role of *taʾwīl* (meaning both 'reversion to the origin' and a form of hermeneutics) in Adonis's method of 'excavating the buried pluralism of the *turāth*.'

1 al-Maghūṭ, Muḥammad 1994.

The concept of *ta'wīl* is, of course, usually associated with Shi'ite, and especially Ismaili Shi'ite, practices of interpretation: the endeavor to discern the hidden (*bāṭin*) meanings lurking beneath literal (*ẓāhir*) statements. Adonis employs this ancient method in interpreting the classical heritage and yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, this is all in the service of futurity. It is, as Creswell describes it, 'a revisionary fracturing of its [i. e. the tradition's] unity and an attempt to identify the historical precursors of an as-yet-unrealized Arab modernism.' Creswell's discussion of this is one of the most valuable and astute of his readings of Adonis's method.

This chapter leads quite logically into the author's sixth chapter on 'the modernist elegy'. For Adonis is very much a poet of elegy, as shown in the last section of *The Songs of Mihyar*. Here he eulogizes such figures as Abū Nuwās, a poet at once sublime and scurrilous, Bashshār ibn Burd, a poet of doubtful orthodoxy, and al-Ḥallāj, the great visionary Sufi executed for blasphemy in 922—for Adonis (as for Louis Massignon, the French scholar who influenced Adonis) a 'Christ-like figure of resurrection or indeed an Adonis-like figure of vegetal rebirth'. In this chapter, Creswell also discusses Adonis's *A Tomb for New York* of 1970, an 'experimental' poem that reads (to me at least) as a hodgepodge of diverse influences (Lorca, Whitman, the French tradition of the *tombeau*-genre, etc.) that never cohere successfully.

In an epilogue, covering the years from 1979 to 2011, Creswell discusses Adonis's enthusiastic initial support for the Iranian Revolution, an ignoble misstep in an otherwise honorable career. Even with Creswell's explanations, it is hard to understand how the poet, always intent on severing poetry from politics, could welcome Khomeini's thuggish assumption of power, let alone his brutal and murderous policies. Adonis even wrote a wretched scrap of doggerel, duly published in a newspaper (and later suppressed), to celebrate the event. Within a year, Adonis had revised his view as Khomeini's true agenda became unmistakably apparent. As Creswell summarizes his disillusioned position: 'Khomeini turned out to be a politician after all.'

City of Beginnings, originally the author's doctoral dissertation at New York University, is meticulously documented. Its bibliography is exemplary. It is also very well written, with little, if any, of the sort of jargon that usually deadens literary-historical studies; it is a pleasure to read, both for the lucidity of its prose as for the tacit but evident sympathy of imagination that enlivens it throughout. Creswell's translations are exact but nuanced; and this is especially on display in his translations of poems. For example, his version of Adonis's 'The New Noah' (*Nūḥ al-jadīd*) of 1958, a magnificent poem, is beautifully executed; it gives one the hope that he will now publish a selection of his translations from Adonis's poetry, including his *magnum opus* 'The Book' (*al-*

Kitāb), his masterpiece (written after the period covered here). Finally, Creswell succeeds admirably in his initial aim. He has set Modernist Beirut firmly on the map.

References

al-Maghūṭ, Muḥammad (1994): *Joy Is Not My Profession*, translated by John Asfour and Alison Burch. Montréal: Signal Editions.